

*Citation for published version:*

Mondon, A & Glynos, J 2016 'The political logic of populist hype: the case of right wing populism's 'meteoric rise' and its relation to the status quo' POPULISMUS Working Papers, vol. 4, Populismus, Thessaloniki.

*Publication date:*

2016

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

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**POPULISMUS Working Papers No. 4**

**Thessaloniki  
December 2016**

**POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY**  
**POPULISMUS**

**Jason Glynos & Aurelien Mondon**

***The political logic of populist hype: The case of right-wing populism's 'meteoric rise' and its relation to the status quo***<sup>\*</sup>

**Introduction**

'The European elections have delivered their truth, and it is painful'. François Hollande's assessment of the 2014 European election results was damning, pointing to widespread 'distrust of Europe and of government parties' (Higgins 26 May 2014). This evaluation of the result was shared by journalists and politicians commenting on the 'shock', 'earthquake', or 'tsunami' that shook the continent and its leaders to their core. Later that year, the political commentator Tony Barber (Barber 16 September 2014) issued a stark warning: 'European democracy must keep right-wing populism at bay'. The article appeared in the *Financial Times* as wave after wave of populist electoral advances following the European elections appeared to test the foundations of European liberal democracy at the regional, national, and local levels. While acknowledging that 'right-wing populism displays different characteristics from country to country, possessing a nastier far-right streak in Greece and Hungary than in Germany and the UK', right-wing populist parties were nonetheless lumped together by Barber to represent a unified albeit murky threat to democracy itself. In this view, democracy epitomizes the ideal of moderation and rational deliberation, while populism carries with it the spectre of extremism and passions gone awry. Tellingly, Barber's explanation of the populist phenomenon to which he is witness is virtually non-existent. How European democracy is to keep right-wing populism at bay is thus left unanswered. Instead, his characterization of the current situation as an impasse sounds fateful and alarmist, conjuring, as he does, a rather curious image of the apparently robust walls of Jericho pitted against the passionate and powerful horn-blowing of the Israelites.

We argue that this *Financial Times* opinion piece is typical of the sort of response in the wake of the populist phenomenon in France and the United Kingdom, as well as other European countries. When reproduced endlessly across mainstream media outlets and even some academic fora, it becomes an instance of what is referred to in this article as 'populist hype'. The term 'populist hype' seeks to capture at least three things. First, it aims to capture something about how politicians, as well as media and academic commentators, have tended to skew the

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<sup>\*</sup> This working paper was conceived in the wake of the 2014 *Populismus* conference in Thessaloniki and first presented at the Political Studies Association Conference in 2015. It has since received considerable feedback from journal reviewers and colleagues, which we have incorporated into this version of our paper. The ideas, as originally conceived, have proved rather prescient given recent developments in the UK (Brexit), the US (Trump's election), France (the presidential elections), and elsewhere; and it is for this reason that its publication in its present form in the *Populismus* Observatory remains timely. Our thesis will be further elaborated and updated in relation to developments from 2016 onwards in due course; in the meantime, we would like to thank the *Populismus* team for their help and feedback, particularly Yannis Stavrakakis, as well as the many reviewers and colleagues for their useful comments.

meaning of the populist phenomenon. In our case, this involves presenting an overly simplistic and homogenized picture of the 'meteoric' rise of right-wing populism across Europe. This is accomplished by individual analyses and commentaries that make assertions on the basis of highly selective use, and decontextualized interpretations, of electoral results. Second, populist hype entails the exaggeration of the significance of the populist phenomenon, particularly as regards its political significance. This is accomplished primarily by the sheer volume of copy devoted to the discussion of the apparent rise of right-wing populism, as opposed to other manifestations of discontent. The 'hyped' response to the 2014 electoral outcomes exaggerated the political significance of the populist phenomenon by suggesting, for example, that right-wing populist parties and movements are the only (or main) political alternative to the mainstream status quo. While the Front National (FN) and UKIP have had a clear impact on the political agenda as their programme and discourse entered the mainstream, we argue that this impact was not simply a reflection of their electoral or strategic achievements, but also a product of the exaggerated role attributed to the FN and UKIP by mainstream politicians and commentators. Finally, with the term 'populist hype' this article highlights how many political commentators tend to characterize the populist phenomenon in apocalyptic terms. There is a tendency in the present case, for example, to emphasize how the rise of right-wing populism signals nothing less than a threat to democracy as such. In looking across the three dimensions of the hyped response to the populist phenomenon, however, it is worth pointing out how they should not be understood as entirely autonomous from one another: they are in fact often found to be in a relation of over-determination with each other (Althusser 2005[1962]).

In drawing attention to this generalized 'populist hype' we are not suggesting that the varying degrees of success of right-wing parties, in our case UKIP and the FN, do not deserve attention or that they do not have a real impact on politics and exclusion. Our focus is related, but distinct. We draw attention instead to the skewed interpretation of many commentators, which often identifies right-wing populism as itself a disease rather than as a mere symptom. The aim of this article is thus not to engage with right-wing populist parties themselves, but rather with a particular interpretation of, and reaction to, their recent electoral performances by the 'mainstream', and how it has helped distort the diagnosis on the current state of liberal democracy in the post-democratic world (Crouch 2004). Yet the article does not simply engage in a re-characterization exercise that substitutes one picture of the 2014 right-wing populist 'wave' in France and the UK with another more accurate one. This re-characterization is of course essential, but we seek first and foremost to re-problematize the hyped response to the populist phenomenon. In particular, we argue that the problem with populist hype is not merely that it misrepresents what is actually going on. The main issue is in fact that populist hype has a 'logic' whose integrity and efficacy does not rely in any straightforward way on its representational truth or untruth.

Drawing on the Essex School of discourse theory, and closely associated strands of psychoanalytic political theory (Glynos and Howarth 2007, Laclau and Mouffe 1985, Stavrakakis et al. 2000, Glynos 2001, Stavrakakis 1999, Žižek 1993), as well as recent analyses of populist parties across Europe (see for example, Mral et al. 2013, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012, Wodak 2015) and their relationship to the media (Mudde 2007, Mazzoleni 2008), we argue that populist hype has functioned as a political logic. By qualifying it as a political logic the aim is to foreground how the

dominant ‘hyped’ response to the populist conjuncture by politicians and the media has served to pre-empt the contestation of some troubling norms animating the regimes of ‘really existing’ liberal democracy and to contest other norms which many consider worthy of defence. For example, instead of serving as an occasion to broach a set of debates about the character of liberal democracy as it operates today in Europe, the horrific spectre of a populism gone amok is more often used to conjure the image of an imminent threat to democracy as such. This logic tends to marginalise meaningful debate about the way democracy tends to operate, i.e., as an electoral democracy that installs and reinforces alienating tendencies (Katsambekis 2015). Moreover, this article argues that the tenacity of populist hype – and its continued role as a political logic – indicates how it has successfully tapped into potent affective registers rooted in collective desires and fantasies structured around the idea of ‘theft of enjoyment’, giving it its energy and verve.

A key aim of the article is to show how the above-mentioned theoretical resources can be deployed to frame the 2014 populist conjuncture (and similar conjunctures) in a productive way. More systematic empirical research can provide sharper accounts of populist hype in precise settings, but given the limited scope of this article, and to provide a starting point, our aim rather is to make a theoretical intervention that generates some insight, points to new ‘interpretive’ hypotheses, and reframes problems. Examples to illustrate and help better formulate our hypotheses will be drawn from France and the United Kingdom. These countries were selected because of the electoral gains made by UK and French right-wing populist parties in the 2014 European elections and because of the voluminous commentary these parties have attracted more generally, a commentary that has itself been folded into a narrative about wider European populist trends, despite distinct historical origins of country-specific populist parties (Crépon et al. 2015, Startin 2015). More generally, however, this theoretical intervention offers a framework within which one could subsequently and more systematically explore and probe hypotheses about the character and significance of ‘populist hype’.

Rather than applying to the case studies our own theoretical understanding of populism, this article explores the implications of the way the term ‘populism’ is mobilised by key ‘enunciators’ (i.e., politicians, political commentators, etc.) in the 2014 populist conjuncture. To this end, the argument of this article proceeds in three steps. First, it problematises right-wing populist hype as a dominant response to the conjuncture of 2014, particularly as regards the EU elections. It then considers how a critique that relies only on pointing to the falsehood presupposed by such hype misses its political and ideological significance. We draw out its political significance by identifying two key norms at stake in ‘really existing’ liberal democracy: electoral primacy and presumptive equality. This entails articulating the political logic embodied in the ‘performance’ of populist hype. Finally, it hypothesizes that its ideological significance is linked to the fantasmatic narratives that shape the affective tenor of the mainstream response to the populist conjuncture.

## **Characterizing and problematizing right-wing populist hype**

It has already been noted that the expression ‘populist hype’ aims to capture at least three, potentially inter-related, dimensions associated with the storylines offered by politicians, journalists, and some academics: (i) a rather selective and thus skewed understanding of the populist phenomenon, namely, as a simple and sizeable rise of

right-wing party popularity across Europe that obfuscates a more complex set of developments; (ii) an exaggeration of the significance of this rise, particularly as regards the political role attributed to right-wing populist parties and movements (by implying they are the main alternative to the *status quo*); and (iii) a tendency to describe the rise of right-wing populism in apocalyptic tones that signal a threat to democracy as such. Each of these dimensions entails claims that can be rebutted through a contextualization process that yields a more nuanced picture.

It is first important to restate that our aim here is not to deny that there has been a rise in popularity of some radical right parties or to downplay their impact across Europe. Instead, we focus on the reaction their rise has triggered and the ways in which it may have been skewed and exaggerated, leading to an ideological realignment and shift in political discourse favourable to right-wing objectives and dispositions (Kallis 2013, Mondon 2013). Clearly, some parties achieved remarkable results with the French Front National (FN), the Dansk Folkeparti (DF) and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) winning the ballot in their respective countries. With the return of the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) to the forefront of politics in Austria, there were signs that reconstructed extreme right parties made a European breakthrough in 2014. On the more extreme side of alleged 'right-wing populism', the relative success of Jobbik (J) in Hungary and Chrysi Avgí (Golden Dawn - GD) in Greece were also used to warn of the return of a 'nastier' politics. Yet, as Cas Mudde (Mudde 22 August 2013) noted before the election, caution was needed in interpreting such results as the simplistic rise of a unified 'populist right': 'despite all the talk of the rise of the far right as a consequence of the Great Recession, the sober fact is that far right parties have gained support in "only" eleven of the twenty-eight EU member states, and increased their support substantially in a mere five'. The elections confirmed this as parties such as Geert Wilders' Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) and the Vlaams Belang (VB) suffered setbacks. The performance of 'populist' parties was therefore uneven at best in the European elections (see figure 1).

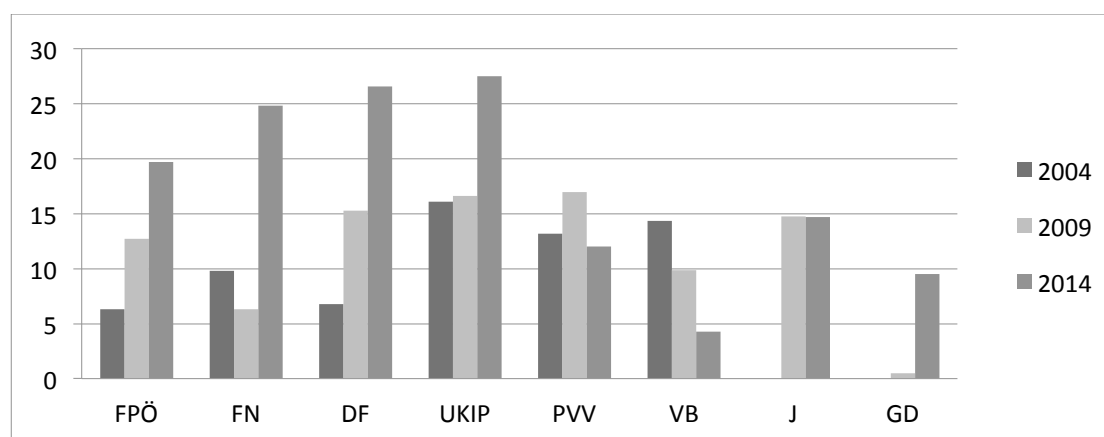


Figure 1. Right-wing populist party results in the European elections (as a percentage of the total votes cast) – source: European Parliament

However, the skewed character of a simplistic (and panicked) picture portraying a rather monolithic right-wing populist rise across Europe can be further put into question by focussing on the magnitude of this rise, not just on the above-mentioned geographical unevenness. Even in those countries that show a rise in popular support for right wing parties, the magnitude attributed to this rise can vary

depending on the assumptions underlying the calculation of the magnitude. The above figures portray popular support as a proportion of the total votes cast. But an alternative measure of popular support can be derived by looking at votes cast in relation to the number of registered voters. Viewed from this latter perspective, panicky pictures of a Europe-wide right-wing rise appear even more skewed (or 'hyped') than a simple geographic corrective would suggest (see figure 2).<sup>1</sup> As Figure 2 shows, apart from the Dansk Folkeparti, all other parties failed to appeal to more than ten per cent of registered voters.

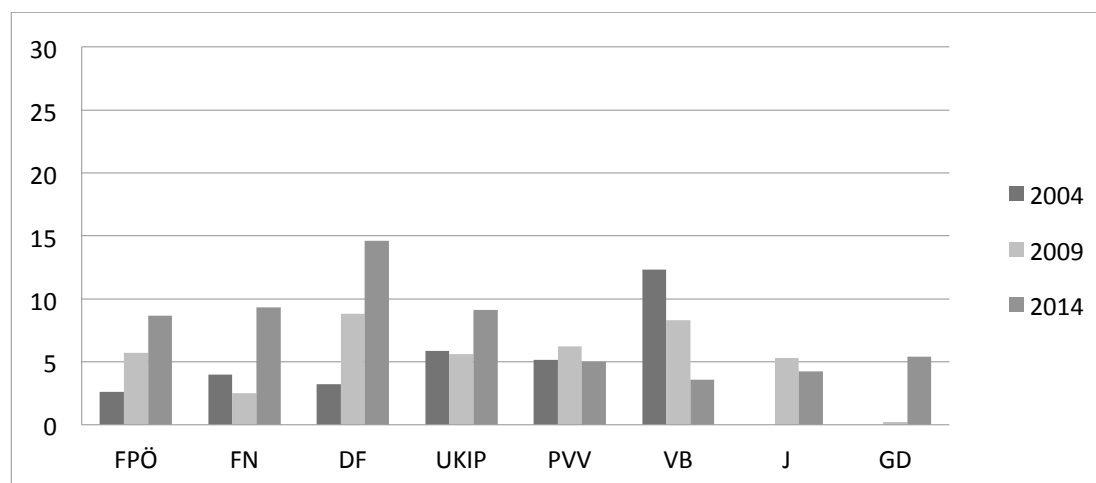


Figure 2. Right-wing populist party results in the European elections (as a percentage of registered voters) – source: *European Parliament*

Therefore, the simplistic picture of a rise of right-wing populism can appear skewed as a result of selective evidence-gathering practices linked to geography and vote share measurements. These spatial complications, however, can be supplemented with temporal-contextual complications linked to the comparative historical trajectories of individual parties. Such comparisons can introduce some further rather striking nuance to the above simplistic picture of a 'rise', particularly if we look at the two parties poised to lead the debate about a potential populist alliance in the aftermath of the elections. The FN saw a surge in vote compared to the 2004 and 2009 elections when it reached a trough towards the end of Jean-Marie Le Pen's presidency. However, put in temporal perspective, this increase translated into a sharp fall compared to Marine Le Pen's 2012 presidential bid (13.95 per cent of the registered vote against 9.3). While European elections attract traditionally fewer voters, this decrease of more than 1.7 million votes in elections favourable to protest parties, and with government ratings at a record low, demonstrated the relatively limited ability of the FN to bring voters (back) to the polling booths. Similarly, UKIP's increase from 5.61 per cent to 9.11 per cent of the registered vote was far less impressive than the 27.5% commonly advertised. Despite 'historically

<sup>1</sup> In making these points we do not mean to suggest that measuring party popularity as a function of registered voters is necessarily always better than as a function of vote share. However, the interesting point for us relates to the way in which democratic legitimacy and party support is measured, and how the present form of populist hype relies on the selective or predominant use of just one of these measures. One of the aims of the article is to demonstrate that these measures belong very much to a contested area, but that, currently, the most common measure referenced with regard to party support and electoral performance is vote share. While this measure is certainly useful, our aim is to highlight that such a measure is only one of a range of possible measures.



unprecedented levels of coverage for a minor party',<sup>2</sup> the party whose platform had always focused only on the European questions failed to appeal to more than one out of nine UK voters.

So far we have sought to demonstrate in what sense the idea of 'populist hype' can be said to rely on a skewed portrait of the rise of right wing party popularity. Given a relatively modest popular support, it is interesting to note how much media coverage is devoted to the discussion of the rise of right-wing populist parties (Crépon et al. 2015, Goodwin and Ford 2013). This disproportionately voluminous media exposure tends to assign a rather exaggerated significance to the rise of such parties generally, and a rather exaggerated political significance more specifically. A casual database search reveals a disproportionate number of mentions of UKIP and the FN compared to left-wing alternatives, for example, and – occasionally – even governing parties. In the UK, in the month leading up to the 2014 European elections, the term 'UKIP' appeared in 1,116 headlines in the United Kingdom in the main national newspapers, while the term 'Green Party' appeared in less than 20 headlines. Interestingly the term 'abstention' – which would indicate a more nuanced picture emerging – appeared in none.<sup>3</sup> UKIP's television coverage showed a similar picture, with "imagebites" of UKIP and Nigel Farage appear(ing) more than other parties and their leaders' (Cushion et al. 2015). It is a short step from here to creating an impression that right-wing parties are widely understood as *the* alternative to mainstream parties, even if much of the reporting is negative and large slices of the public vehemently disagree or disapprove of the objectives and ideals of right-wing parties (see images 1a and 1b and Willsher et al. 16 November 2014 amongst others).



<sup>2</sup> Between 2009 and 2013, Matthew Goodwin and Rob Ford (2013) counted '25 appearances by Nigel Farage on Question Time and more than 23,000 press mentions'.

<sup>3</sup> This includes the print and electronic versions of national newspapers including the *Daily Mail*, *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, *the Mirror*, *the Evening Standard*, *The Sun*, and *the Express*. Analysis undertaken via the Lexis-Nexis database, from 22 April 2014 to 22 May 2014.



Images 1. 1a. Front page from *Libération* on 26 May 2014, the day after the FN 'won' the European elections, despite failing to appeal to more than 1 out of ten voters. 1b. Front page from *The Guardian* on 4 May 2014, a year before the European elections.

Cécile Alduy and Stéphane Wahnich (Alduy and Wahnich 2015) have highlighted a similarly disproportionate trend for the FN in the French media. In 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy was mentioned 1029 times in the mainstream media, and Jean-Marie Le Pen 518 times, even though the future president received more than three times the number of votes of the FN candidate in the presidential election that year. In 2010, even before becoming leader of her party, Marine Le Pen received more coverage than UMP president Jean-François Copé (581 occurrences to 481) and only marginally less than François Hollande (676), then secretary of the Parti Socialiste and future president. Since then, the trend has favoured FN coverage despite stringent media laws. A clear indication of this disproportionate media exposure of, and thus exaggerated significance attributed to, FN can be gleaned by looking at BFMTV. BFMTV, one of the most popular news channels in France, received a formal warning from the Supreme Audiovisual Council (CSA) for its coverage of the 2014 local elections between the 10<sup>th</sup> of February and the 14<sup>th</sup> of March: 42.23% of the time allocated to the campaign concerned the FN, while the UMP received 18.67% and the PS 14.77% (CSA 19 March 2014). While BFMTV was forced by law to even out its coverage, Henri Maler and Julien Salingue (2014, 103) rightly noted that 'the political reach of the results of the FN can be measured with their media reach. And, in this respect, there is no doubt that the media construct of the Front National is disproportionate'.

Finally, we come to the third dimension of the 'hyped' response: the portrayal of the rise of right-wing populism in predominantly apocalyptic terms.<sup>4</sup> This is an important dimension to foreground because it appears to sustain or 'energize' the other dimensions on account of their overdetermined inter-relation. Natural disaster metaphors such as 'shock', 'wave' and 'earthquake' commonly headline the front pages of major newspapers after so-called populist breakthroughs. We qualify these rhetorical flourishes as apocalyptic because they tend to convey a sense of existential threat: the issue is framed in terms of survival, be it for Europe or democracy itself (see for example MacShane 30 December 2014).

In better understanding the character of this threat, at least as it is portrayed by many politicians and journalists, it is helpful to appeal to the concept of 'theft of enjoyment', which derives from the psychoanalytic tradition. 'Theft of enjoyment' expresses an idea about how, at a fundamental level, each subject's enjoyment, associated with the pleasures and pains of one's way of life, is always already a reflexive enjoyment: my own enjoyment is structured on the basis of how I imagine others enjoying themselves. This reflexivity triggers a whole array of different affective responses. For example, it may trigger jealousy if I imagine others enjoying themselves excessively. Or it may trigger feelings of outrage and resentment if I imagine others not merely enjoying themselves excessively, but enjoying themselves *at my expense* (cf. Chang and Glynos 2011). The idea of 'theft of enjoyment' tries to

<sup>4</sup> While this is outside the remit of this article, a similar argument could be made with regard to left-wing populism and its coverage.

capture what is at stake in this latter case, or similar sorts of cases, because we may experience our own enjoyment as 'stolen'.

As Slavoj Žižek (Žižek 1993) notes regarding the concept of the nation,

It appears to us as "our Thing" (perhaps we could say *cosa nostra*), as something accessible only to us, as something "they," the others, cannot grasp; nonetheless it is something constantly menaced by "them." It appears as what gives plenitude and vivacity to our life, and yet the only way we can determine it is by resorting to different versions of the same empty tautology. All we can ultimately say about it is that the Thing is "itself," "the real Thing," "what it really is about," etc. If we are asked how we can recognize the presence of this Thing, the only consistent answer is that the Thing is present in that elusive entity called "our way of life."

One can see the relevance of such an idea in trying to better understand the character of the above-mentioned existential threat to democracy. 'We' know 'we' live in a democracy because we can 'enumerate disconnected fragments' of the way our democratic lives work: we are citizens, we are protected by human and political rights, one of these being the right to vote, we can participate in the electoral process freely, we have a free press and freedom of speech etc (Rancière 2005). And yet we feel we are at the mercy of 'Others' abusing and jeopardising our way of life, stealing our enjoyment.

But who, precisely, are these 'Others' who abuse and jeopardize our democratic way of life?<sup>5</sup> In relation to the populist hype hypothesis, one prominent figure to whom responsibility for this existential threat has been attributed can be identified: the *irrational (populist) voter*.<sup>6</sup> One prominent example to illustrate this type of unacceptable, and even dangerous, behaviour was the reaction to the French presidential election in 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the second round. Front pages of national newspapers (see images 2) unanimously condemned the vote after the first round, and expressed exaggerated relief after the second, ignoring at the same time the poor performance of the mainstream parties and the rise in abstention (Mondon 2015).

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that the logic of 'theft of enjoyment' is often – and most obviously perhaps – applied to explain the stance of rightwing parties, their representatives, and some of their supporters. Here, however, we are engaged in the rather unusual exercise of invoking this logic to elucidate the reaction of the normally tolerant elite-liberal politicians and commentariat.

<sup>6</sup> Irrational (populist) voters have at times been termed 'reluctant radicals' (Fieschi, C., Morris, M. and Caballero, L. (2012) *Recapturing the Reluctant Radical: How to win back Europe's populist vote*. London: Counterpoint.)



Images 2. Front pages of major French newspapers on 23 April 2002 – the use of words such as ‘earthquake’, ‘bomb’, ‘shock’, ‘danger’ and simply but forcefully ‘No’ being particularly noteworthy here. After the second round, *Libération* titled its front page ‘Ouf’ (Phew).

In voting for racist/xenophobic/protectionist/interventionist options, the populist right voter renders obvious the paradoxical character of liberal democracy as the democratic/anti-democratic choice re-appears within democracy itself: you can vote for whoever you want, but you really shouldn’t. In this case, ‘Others’ (those voting for the populist right) irrationally and dangerously enjoy their democratic freedom inasmuch as they vote for seemingly radical options that seem to threaten the existence of democracy itself. This in turn threatens the narrative of the ‘end of history’ where political battles would be waged in the liberal centre and democratic choice would be limited to options with comfortable and negligible differences (Fukuyama 1992). The legitimacy of this system was strengthened by the existence of left and right options on the extremes of the political spectrum – options rendered obsolete on account of the stigma attached to crimes committed by their ideological forebears. Yet as the system falters, the appeal of these more radical options can grow again. A common storyline holds that this leads to the rise of an unruly mob (often referred to as ‘working-class’) keen to exercise these more radical options.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In fact, as we noted in our earlier discussions of different vote-based measures of party popularity, most registered voters turn to abstention thus boosting the share of the vote of small parties, and the right-wing populists in particular. Abstention in the 2014 European elections was at an all-time high (42.54% participation against 43.00% in 2009). Participation in France and the UK was lower than the EU average with 42.43% and 35.40% respectively (TNS Opinion (2014a) 2014 post-election survey: European elections 2014, analytical overview, Brussels: European Parliament). Across the EU, the lowest

By enjoying their freedom to vote for something ‘radical’, these ‘irrational’ and ‘irresponsible’ voters are impacting on the enjoyment of ‘our’ democracy. When irrational citizens risk moving away from the ‘proper’ parameters of our liberal democracy, this produces a moral outrage directly linked to a perceived threat to our democratic ideals (that is, those of the elite and self-titled middle classes).

### **Problematizing ‘really existing’ liberal democracy**

The storyline figure of the irrational voter energizes narratives about threats to European liberal democracies. They help secure the ‘grip’ of a broader apocalyptic narrative in part because it manages to provoke feelings associated with a theft of enjoyment. But this is not the only thing these storylines have in common. Importantly, the preponderant focus on this figure as a threat to democracy has meant – somewhat paradoxically perhaps – that the idea of democracy presupposed in such a threat has not been sufficiently thematised. In particular, the operation of ‘really existing liberal democracy’ has been left largely unexamined and unproblematized.

This identification of ‘really existing liberal democracy’ as an issue worth thematising in a more sustained and systematic way brings us a step closer to grasping the political significance of the populist hype we have sketched out thus far. One prominent way the problem of ‘really existing liberal democracy’ has been expressed in academic literature is in terms of a decline of trust in our political institutions. Numerous polls have suggested that a majority of Europeans no longer trust their political institutions, whether parliamentary representatives, government or political parties. Results from the 2014 Eurobarometer showed that ‘[a] lack of trust in politics in general’ was the main reason given for not voting among all categories except the youngest respondents and homemakers’ (TNS Opinion 2014a). Since 2004, there has been only one instance out of twenty where trust in either parliament or government reached an approval of more than 40 per cent across Europe (European Commission 2015). Interestingly, it was in the September 2007 wave, before the Global Financial Crisis hit Europe, that politicians and governments appeared the most trusted, or least distrusted. Since September 2009, the level of trust has fallen below 33 per cent and as low as 24 per cent in the Autumn 2013 survey (see figure 3). Trust in political parties has been even lower with only one instance in which levels reached more than 20 per cent (22 per cent in April 2006). In France, up to 90 per cent of respondents declared their lack of trust in the November 2014 survey (80 per cent in the UK in the same survey) (see figure 4).

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participation in terms of occupation was to be found among manual workers (35%) and the unemployed (31%). In France, 34% of manual workers voted, while 3 out of 4 abstained in the UK, indicating a 25% participation rate (TNS Opinion (2014b) *2014 post-election survey: European elections 2014, socio-demographic annex*, Brussels: European Parliament). While many so-called working class voters may have voted for the populist right, the vast majority of the working class did not choose these parties or any others, something that has been overlooked in most mainstream coverage.

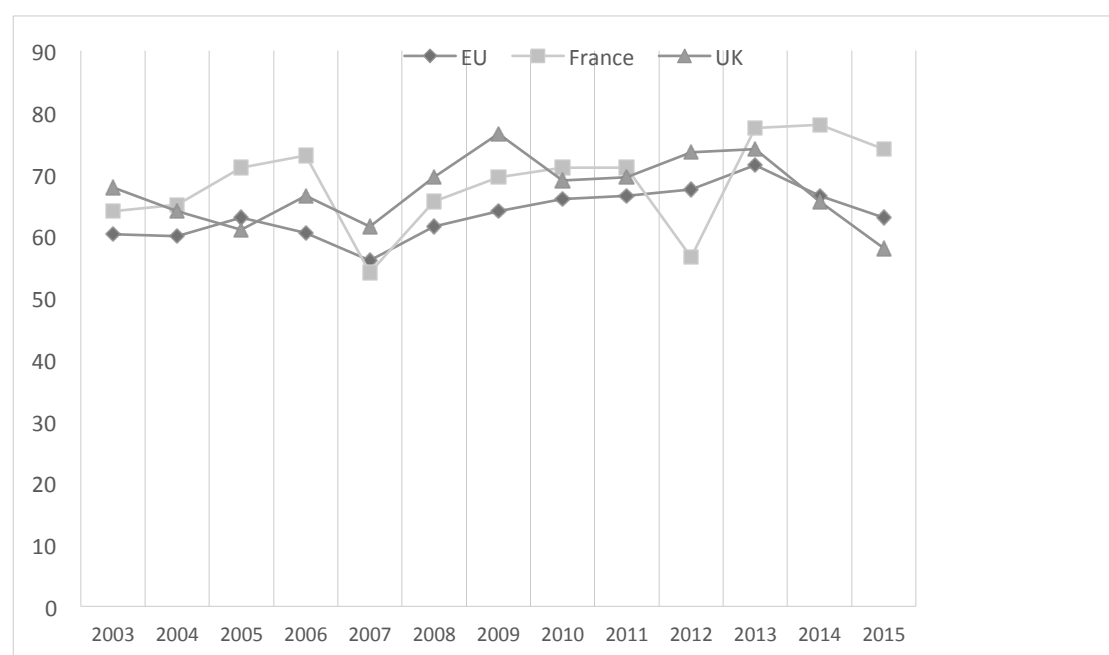


Figure 3: level of distrust in 'government' (question: 'I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it?' Answer: 'Do not trust'). For each year when more than one poll was taken, the average is represented. (source: Eurobarometer)

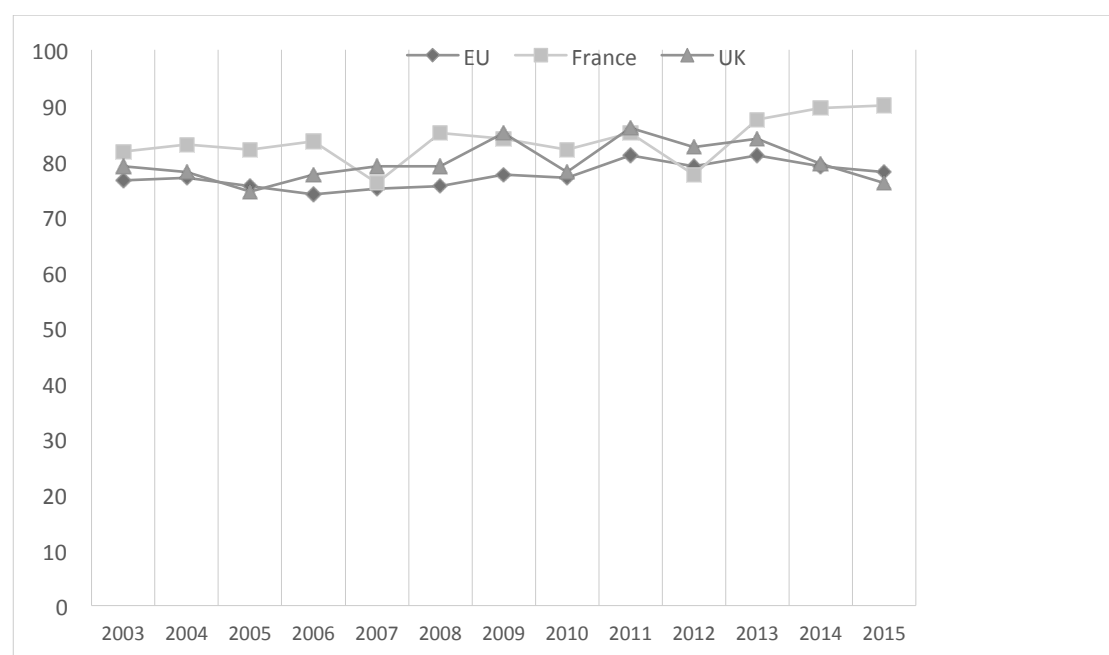


Figure 4: level of distrust in 'political parties' (source: Eurobarometer)

There is a vast literature that points to widespread political discontent in existing liberal democratic societies. Although the more mainstream part of this literature often focusses on the lack of trust in our political institutions, there is also a common recognition that this lack of trust is symptomatic of a deeper problem linked to the idea that, increasingly, people's experience tells them not only that they



are getting a bad ('utility') deal, but, more importantly, that they do not have much control over decisions that affect their lives (Agamben et al. 2011, Crouch 2004, Dean 2009, Rancière 1995, Rancière 2005). This suggests we need to be more precise about which norms are at stake when we consider the question of trust vis-à-vis our liberal democratic institutions. In other words, it is not sufficient to point to attitudinal trends. We also need to identify what and how specific norms govern our liberal democratic practices, since these tend to influence our predisposition to trust (or not to trust) associated institutions and officials.

This enables us to critically re-cast the political and ideological significance of the phenomenon we have characterized as 'populist hype'. Populist hype can certainly be understood as perpetuating a kind of false-consciousness. This is because it exaggerates the rise of the populist right and falsely promotes its role as the main alternative to 'business as usual'. However, it is also important to highlight how populist hype has a certain 'logic' to it. This logic has two components. One (ideological) component is related to the idea of enjoyment and the logics of fantasy and desire that make this possible. This has already been mentioned in connection with the apocalyptic dimension of populist hype narratives, and it is something we shall return to again later. Another (political) component is related to the precise norms of our democratic practice that we consider worth contesting or protecting. From this point of view, populist hype can be understood not simply as a propagator of falsehoods but also as embodying a political logic whose effect is to pre-empt the contestation of democratic norms we consider worth contesting; or to contest democratic norms we consider worth protecting. In other words, it is possible to argue that the problem has less to do with a threat to democracy as such and more to do with how a particular conception of democracy has become naturalized. In fact, we argue that the insistent focus on *threats* to democracy has served to avoid a more systematic and critical examination of, and wider debate about, the *democratic system itself*, including a more in-depth analysis of the current disillusion within the electorate.

## **Populist Hype as a political logic**

So far, we have argued that the dominant response to the 2014 populist conjuncture has been 'hyped'. The story is much more complex and nuanced than the image of a right-wing populist surge would have us believe. Yet we also suggested that although it is important to get this nuanced picture right as part of a general process of characterisation, it is also important not to lose sight of the 'logic' of such populist hype. Thus, this part of the article seeks to draw out its *political* logic in more detail in order to get a better fix on how to critically evaluate the role and function of populist hype.

*Political logic* is a term used by poststructuralist political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) in order to emphasize its difference from what they call social logics. With the term social logics, they aim to capture the relatively stable patterns, rules, or norms manifest in practices or regimes of practice, for example, the norms of 'really existing' liberal democracy. Typically, these are understood as 'natural', in the sense that they are taken for granted, internalized, and uncontested. The operation of political logics, on the other hand, often becomes clear in times of crisis when 'things are not quite right', revealing, even for a brief moment, how what appears to be natural can be

otherwise. This 'visibility of contingency' is central to understanding the role and function of political logics. Political logics are thus understood to be processes that seek to maintain or disrupt settled norms.

The concept of logics has been further elaborated and systematically developed into a 'logics approach' to the study of social and political phenomena (Glynos and Howarth 2007). Drawing on psychoanalytic insights to supplement key poststructuralist premises, this approach identifies and names a third logic that draws on the concept of fantasy to elucidate ideological processes (Glynos 2001, Glynos and Stavrakakis 2004, Stavrakakis 1999). This *fantasmatic* logic captures something about the desire of subjects, independent of whether such desires are considered (un)realistic. Logics of fantasy thus help account for why and how narratives 'grip' subjects by rendering contingency less visible. The nexus of social, political, and fantasmatic logics is thus deployed to analyse and interpret the discursively constructed character of practices, including the way the *status quo* is protected, challenged, and defended (Glynos et al. 2012).

In light of this theoretical framework, the political logic of populist hype can be discerned by first getting a fix on the character of the *status quo*. In other words, a *political logic* can be identified only in relation to particular norms that are (or should be) the subject of protection, challenge or defence. In our case, this leads to the rather obvious question about which norms in our 'really existing' liberal democratic regime should be identified as worth contesting or defending. In answer to this question two such norms are considered and elaborated in more detail below: the norm of *electoral primacy*, and the norm of *presumptive equality*. It is argued that populist hype functions as a *political logic* if it can plausibly be claimed that it is operative in relation to key norms which are thought to be worth contesting (the norm of electoral primacy) or are worth defending and reinforcing (the norm of presumptive equality). Our hypothesis, therefore, is that populist hype serves as a 'master' political logic that gathers together a clutch of more specific political and rhetorical logics that (1) pre-empt the contestation of, and reinforce, the norm of electoral primacy; and (2) undermine or contest the norm of presumptive equality. We discuss each of these in turn.

### *Electoral primacy*

*Electoral primacy* is perhaps the most obvious norm in relation to which populist hype can be characterised as a political logic. This is a norm of 'really existing' liberal democracy that has been identified by numerous scholars and many commentators at the margins of mainstream media as worthy of contestation (Agamben et al. 2011, Ranci  re 2005). They argue that an understanding of democracy as predominantly an electoral democracy needs to be contested and pluralized. In this view, apart from widespread popular and schoolbook renditions of democracy as predominantly an electoral democracy, a well-financed psephological apparatus is mobilised on a daily basis by a massive expert techno-media-academic network to promote and reinforce this understanding and operation of democracy, crowding out other more meaningful (deliberative, local and economically-relevant, etc.) ways of thinking about and practicing democracy (Cayrol 2007, Lepore 2015). From this perspective the norm of electoral primacy is not necessary and indeed could (and should) be otherwise.



Therefore, populist hype here serves as a 'master' political logic that, in feeding off the above-mentioned mediatic, educational and psephological apparatuses, gathers together a set of more targeted political and rhetorical logics that pre-empt the contestation of, and reinforce, the norm of electoral primacy. For example, as previously discussed, by focusing attention on how 'irrational' some voters are in their electoral choices there is a risk that we both individualise the problem (i.e. it is not a problem of the system but of the *individual* voter) and reinforce an electoral conceptualization of democracy since the problem lies with individual voters.

### *Presumptive equality*

The liberal democratic norm of presumptive equality is another norm in relation to which populist hype can be characterised as a political logic. It expresses how the principle of equality is understood to operate in a presumptive fashion, in the sense that equality of regard and treatment among people serves as the default assumption governing the relationship between citizens. The idea of a *presumptive* equality implies of course that it can be rebutted for good reasons in particular circumstances. Crucially, however, it also implies that conditions need to be in place in order to avoid differential, arbitrary, or discriminatory treatment. As was the case with the norm of electoral primacy, the norm of presumptive equality is not a necessary norm. We saw earlier how populist hype has a political logic in relation to the norm of electoral primacy because it promotes and reinforces it. In this case, however, the political logic of populist hype functions in a way which undermines or contests the norm of presumptive equality. This norm thus could (and should) need defending when undermined.

In making this claim we rely on a well-established literature that points out how savvy 'normalisation' strategies adopted by right-wing parties do not prevent us from characterising their rhetoric and tactics as 'neo-racist' (Balibar 1997, Barker 1982). In both our cases, UKIP and the FN pledged explicit allegiance to liberal democratic rules. However, while these parties have denounced forms of traditional racism within their ranks (Sulzer 2015, Saul 2015), albeit unevenly and inconsistently, they have sharpened strategies to render certain forms of exclusion and scapegoating more palatable for, or 'inaudible' to, a mainstream audience, by targeting fantasised versions of Islam in particular (Mondon and Winter 2015, Yilmaz 2011). Treating populist hype as a political logic, however, allows us to contribute to this literature by suggesting that the normalisation of these parties involves a dual process that springs not only from these parties' own strategies, but also from the way 'second order' political analysis and commentary of this populist phenomenon is skewed and disseminated (i.e., 'hyped'). In other words, insofar as the norm of presumptive equality is undermined in the 'first order' discourses of UKIP and FN themselves, we suggest that this undermining is also a feature of 'second order' populist hype, despite its explicit condemnation of right-wing populism, in part because it disseminates this first order discourse more widely and even serves to legitimize its views as belonging to a voting, and thus democratic, polity (Mondon 2015).

For Annie Collovald (2004), applying the term 'populism' to these parties has itself played a key rhetorical role in legitimising right-wing demands and 'mainstreaming' prejudice: replacing traditional terms such as 'extreme right', 'far right' or 'radical right' by 'populism' has been problematic as it is not only 'blurrier', but also less stigmatizing than the ones it is meant to replace'. As this terminology

has taken root in the public discourse, right-wing populist parties have eclipsed the potential and/or importance of other 'popular' alternatives, including more left-wing populist alternatives. After borrowing the rhetoric and even some policies from so-called 'populist' right-wing parties, mainstream politicians have claimed they have merely been listening to the 'people' and their fears (Mondon 2013). Following a similarly circular logic, the media has been able to explain its focus on immigration (and benefit fraud to a certain extent) by the rise of intolerance within the electorate. Our hypothesis therefore is that right-wing populist hype serves as a 'master' political logic that gathers together a set of more specific political and rhetorical logics that undermine or contest the norm of presumptive equality. Although debates about the character of liberal democracy of the sort we advocate no doubt do take place, we argue that the political logic of populist hype tends to narrow the scope of such debate by pushing these discussions to the margins of mainstream political discourse, usually finding a place in 'radical' media outlets or 'minor' academic fora.

## **The fantasmatic logic of Populist Hype**

The bulk of this article has been devoted to the identification and critical evaluation of populist hype, conceived as a political logic, particularly in relation to the norms of electoral primacy and presumptive equality. This final section explores the fantasmatic dimension of populist hype narratives. This is a key part of the argument as the fantasmatic elements of populist hype narratives serve to 'prime' readers in one or another normative direction, in the sense that these fantasmatic elements (and the enjoyment that they make possible) offer ideological support for one or another policy response to perceived problems. This is why it is usually not particularly effective to counter the political logic of right-wing populist hype (as well as nativist right-wing narratives) by appealing only to 'facts'. In other words, facts are not only always-already discursively framed; more than that, they are also often fantasmatically-inflected. In this view, what makes these narratives 'grip' is the enjoyment they make possible, and this enjoyment, in turn, is intimately connected to the subject, conceived as a subject of *lack*, and thus a subject of *desire*. As Žižek (Žižek 1993: pp.203-204) observes, 'what we conceal by imputing to the Other the theft of enjoyment is the traumatic fact that we *never possessed what was allegedly stolen from us*'. Such fantasmatic narratives thereby 'energize' political logics, giving them their force and appeal.

We have already drawn attention to the powerful idea of 'theft of enjoyment' in accounting for the affective power animating the anger and resentment experienced by those horrified by the perceived rise of right-wing populism and the threat this poses to democracy. However, the threat is not so much a threat to democracy as such, as it is to a particular conception of democracy whose privileged definitional criterion is electoral contestation. A political logic of populist hype energized by 'theft of enjoyment' thus succeeds in reinforcing a rather narrow conception of democracy that deserves to be contested and pluralized. This is so for several reasons. First, populist hype narratives suggest that democracy should be understood as a predominantly *electoral* or parliamentary democracy, thereby marginalizing other more deliberative and participatory criteria. Second, populist hype narratives tend to mainstream prejudice in a way that promotes the presumptive exclusion of certain types of people from being equal citizens of our

demos. We could add a third reason here, namely, that populist hype narratives suggest that democracy should be understood as a predominantly *political* democracy, thereby ignoring life experienced outside political institutions. Given how the vast majority of our adult lives are spent in the workplace, of particular note here is the rather systematic exclusion of democratic principles from our economic life generally, and the (neoliberal) production process specifically. Together this deeply troubling triple marginalization can be said to account for a profound and widespread sense of alienation whose source is captured by the term 'capitalo-parliamentarism' (Badiou 2007).

In some sense, then, the seduction and pull of 'theft of enjoyment' tends to deflect attention away from the rather undemocratic character of 'really existing' liberal democracy and political economy. But a question remains. Where, more precisely, does fantasy enter the picture here? By fantasy we simply mean to draw attention to those elements of a narrative that provoke enjoyment and desire. For example: what fantasies make possible the affective experiences associated with 'theft of enjoyment'? At a relatively abstract level, these fantasies could be called 'capitalo-parliamentary' fantasies. In this case, 'capitalo-parliamentary' fantasies sustain a regime of capitalo-parliamentarism. Yet in order to better appreciate the 'tug' of a fantasmatic narrative, it is essential to specify more precisely the (lost or threatened) ideals at stake, the obstacles to those ideals, as well as the character and paradoxes of enjoyment as subjects negotiate and transgress those ideals. Importantly, it is necessary to be attentive to the specific national and historical self-images projected in the effort to heighten the urgency of an existential threat or enhance a beatific future to come. Therefore, such fantasmatic patterns will most certainly vary as a function of media outlet (e.g., conservative, liberal or progressive) and national context and history (UK or French in the present case); something which is beyond the remit of this article.

## Conclusion

The importance of our contribution resides in making explicit how populist hype has a 'logic' to it that is not reducible to irrationality or misrecognition. The article also shows that this 'logic' has political and ideological significance. Its *political* significance is demonstrated by identifying what norms are at stake in such right-wing populist hype, and the mode of relating to them (to pre-empt, reinforce, contest, undermine, or restore certain norms). Its *ideological* significance is highlighted by pointing to the fantasmatic narratives that underlie and animate the populist hype.

The analysis pointed to a potentially powerful source of discontent residing in people's experience, which tells them that they have little control over decisions that affect their lives. This is a source of discontent that is widely noted to afflict 'really existing liberal democracies'. An appeal to the category of *political logic* can serve to bring this discontent into sharper focus in order to tackle it directly, or it can serve to transpose or articulate discontent differently. The article identifies right-wing populist hype as one such potent 'master' political logic which partakes in a kind of double-action movement targeting right-wing populist parties: by construing right-wing populism as a threat to our existing democracies, it pre-empts the contestation of an important norm that is worth contesting: the norm of electoral primacy; by giving extensive exposure to right wing claims and agendas that are explicitly opposed to an out of touch elite political class, it inadvertently undermines the norm

of presumptive equality and installs, restores, and reinforces a set of ethnic, racial, and economic inequality norms.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Insofar as the focus becomes the populism of right-wing parties, it also risks rendering equivalent left and right-wing populism, who often have very different views regarding the norm of presumptive equality (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014).

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**Aurelien Mondon** is a Senior Lecturer in French and comparative politics at the University of Bath. His research focuses predominantly on elite discourse and the mainstreaming of far right politics, particularly through the use of populism and racism. His first monograph *A Populist Hegemony?: The mainstreaming of the extreme right in France and Australia* was published in 2013.

**Jason Glynos** teaches political theory at the Department of Government, University of Essex. He has published in the areas of poststructuralist political theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis, focusing on theories of ideology, democracy, and freedom, and the philosophy and methodology of social science. He is co-author with David Howarth of *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* (Routledge, 2007), and co-editor with Yannis Stavrakakis of *Politics and the Unconscious* (Special Issue of *Subjectivity*, 2010). His current research explores the contributions of discourse analysis and psychoanalysis to the development of a critical political economy.



# **POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY** **POPULISMUS**



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POPULISMUS is implemented within the framework of the Operational Program 'Education and Lifelong Learning' (Action 'ARISTEIA II') and is co-financed by the European Union (European Social Fund) and national funds.